

The Lost Platoon: Shock Infantry

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Category: Halo

Genre: Adventure, Sci-Fi

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2012-10-03 07:12:58

Updated: 2012-10-20 19:58:25

Packaged: 2016-04-27 02:31:10

Rating: M

Chapters: 4

Words: 19,047

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: After an Entire battalion was cut down to roughly a platoon in size in less than a day the UNSC had to do something with the survivors. Now Lieutenant Eva Mixer and her platoon of twenty-two veterans are Marine Shock Infantry, forward pressing and hard hitting fighters always in the thick of it. But will their odd bond hold their minds and bodies together? M for blood and language.

1. Once More Unto The Breach

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Continued from The lost Platoon: A Family's Beginnings

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Once More Unto The Breach

The UNSC frigate Crimson Sun glided through empty space, heading away from the planet Reach and it's star, Epsilon Eridani, strait for the edge of the system. And fast too. The Captain had ordered the reactor pushed to 100% once they were out of Reach's gravity well and they were already spinning up the Shaw-Fujikawa drive in order to jump into slipspace. Crammed into the bowels of the ship was a company of marine infantry and one platoon of newly formed "Shock Infantry".

But that platoon already had a history together. Each and every one of it's twenty-three members were all survivors of a desperate holding action on the planet Brakenor. Their battalion, nearly three-hundred marines in total, had been caught with their pants down by a Covenant destroyer. They would have all been glassed along with the planet's surface if the only UNSC ship left in the system went down in order to get in a lucky shot that crippled the destroyer's

engines. After that the marines spent hours scrambling through the capital city, doing their best to protect civilians and hold onto the spaceport. In the end the destroyer was repaired and less than thirty marines made it off planet. After making it back to Reach, and surviving a debriefing, the ones with the least psychological damage became a single shock infantry platoon, not that any of them knew what that entitled.

Lieutenant Eva Mixer, the platoon's leader, had called the platoon together in the ship's secondary mess hall since the other company was cramming into the actual ready room. Now she was walking down the hall to the mess, rereading her order on her tacpad for the hundredth time. There was a slight shift in the ship's gravity that caused her to brace her shoulder against the wall, the bulkheads shuddered and her stomach flip flopped, they had made the jump. She straightened herself and continued on, down the hall and through the door.

She looked around the room as she entered, all twenty-two of her marines were already there waiting for her. While no one announced her presence they all cut off their conversations and stood at attention, a few like her platoon sergeant gave her a little nod. She waved them down and smiled as they returned to their strange comfort zones. Most sat back down on the benches, some on the tables themselves, a few even laying on the floor while still others remained standing. Something deep inside her loved the fact that all of them were different, came from different backgrounds, and they stuck together like a family.

"We felt the jump Lieutenant, mind telling us where we're going in such a hurry?" The person who spoke was Gunnery Sergeant Eric Donnelly, her platoon sergeant. The red haired marine had inherited a platoon and had worked closely with Mixer throughout almost the entire length of the battle on Brakenor. He was a good leader, a great soldier, and an amazing NCO, not to mention becoming quite a good friend.

"Kepler 47, more specifically a moon orbiting the second planet called Gamma Iocale. I know that we were given a month to rest but something came up. About two weeks ago we received word that Gamma Iocale had been found and attacked by the Covenant."

"What's the situation look like?" Staff Sergeant Kostoff asked. Short and bald, Matt Kostoff was a veteran of more battles than anyone else in the room. He's kind in his own way but seemed rather cold if you didn't know him, and that hollow look in his eyes still got to Mixer.

"The first few Covenant ships were forced to retreat by the navy boys that were in system. When they came back a week later they came with a whole fleet, but by then enough of the nearby UNSC forces had been mustered to force the bastards to drop their infantry and concentrate on the navy. Now some of the population is still evacuating, everything is about as clear as mud. All I know is that we'll be in the system in twelve hours and once we're on the ground we're to report to Major General Atradies." She smiled "On the bright side, we won't be alone this time. We'll have almost a whole division with us, that's twenty thousand marines."

"Well that's good." Kostoff said "But do we know their strength? Or even where we will be landing?"

"Nothing's clear about force size or composition, we'll just have to find out when we get there. As for our drop zone, again nothing is clear. But we do know that a large portion of the area the fighting has been in is woodland."

"The woods? As in trees for snipers to hide in? The place people get lost in all the time? The place with all those horrible stinging insects?" A marine near the back of the group whined, generating a few laughs.

"Stow it marine." Mixer's last senior NCO, Ryan, chimed in. "we're going to war, not on vacation."

"That being said we have full access to the armory. I want all of you to start packing and prepping two pelicans from the main bay. And if you move fast you might just beat the other company there."

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"Let the raiding begin."

Private First Class Ariel Vik was near the middle of the swarm of marines and she had to shoulder her way through the door to the armory. The room was big, easily able to hold all twenty three of them, but the door was just too damn small. But on the other side of the crowded doorway, and all the shoving and innocent grab ass it entailed, were row upon row of weapons gleaming in the light from the overheads. The middle was open with a single large tabletop with racks of guns on either side. There were more racks to the right and the back wall was covered with heavier ordinance such as SPNKr rockets, grenade launchers and the like. To the left Vik could see pieces of armor on the tables as well as several crates marked M52B.

She walked to one of the racks and ran her hand over the row of weapons. Almost everything the UNSC had to offer was under her fingertips. MA5C assault rifles, M7/caseless sub-machine guns, M90 shotguns, S2 sniper rifles and... Vik paused as her hand brushed over the case of a BR55 battle rifle. She had only used one once before, when she was alone in the middle of Brakenor's night. It was as easy to fire as an MA5 and she had fallen in love with it's stopping power and accuracy quickly. It felt amazing to have one in her hands again.

"If I remember correctly you're pretty good with that thing." The marine next to her remarked. Private First Class Roman Kray and his squad had been pinned down by a Covenant ambush. Nearly out of ammo and down to three men they had written themselves off as dead. But Vik had heard the firing and with a few well placed grenades and using up all of her battle rifle ammo she managed to save them. She had stuck with them ever since.

"I love this gun, It's my baby." She said cradling the rifle and smiling broadly. "Let me guess, you're going to take-"

"A shotgun." They chorused, and he nodded. "That and an M7, great combo. And before you ask what I'm going to do if we are in a ranged fight, well that's why I'm sticking close to you."

She laughed a little at that. "I have to admit that you aren't a complete idiot. Are you sure you can carry that much?"

He stopped stuffing M7 magazines into his pack and looked at her, one eyebrow raised. "I'm going to ignore the gaping hole you left in my ego and point out that the M7 is as light as a feather and I can carry twice as much ammo than with an MA5."

"And the shotgun?"

"Takes up a portion of the weight the extra ammo would." He said grabbing a few more magazines.

"So I can't convince you to even consider something with longer range?" Vik asked with a sigh.

"Nope. But the SMG can be pretty accurate. And if worse comes to worse I'll pick up what I can. By the time I need to, there will be plenty of gun lying around."

Vik shook her head and started packing magazines for her battle rifle in silence. Another marine reached between them and pulled an S2 off the rack. The platoon's only trained sniper put the rifle to his shoulder and checked the sights. After inspecting the rest of the weapon he placed it on the table behind him and also started packing ammunition. Kray watched the sniper with a smile on his face.

"See, I'm not the only one sticking with what I know."

"The difference is," Nelms said while reaching for an M7 "I'm balancing my rile with this. If you stick purely to close quarters karma is going bite you in the ass."

"Hey, I've proven I can shoot just as good as anyone else." Kray pointed out, raising his voice.

"Sure you can." A marine across the table said, sarcasm thick in his voice.

"You were there, you all saw it!"

"All I know," Vik said, closing her pack and heading off to get her armor "is that neither of you won me any money."

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The Crimson Sun came out of slipspace outside of the orbit of the second planet and a few degrees above the plane of the ecliptic. The navigator had the ship turning towards the gas giant Gamma mere seconds after entering the system, and long before the sensor sweep of the area was done. Before they started the first leg of their journey reports had the Covenant fleet being held in the inner portion of they system, on the far side of the twin suns from Gamma. But that report was two days old and the alien ships could be anywhere in the system.

On the other hand there were UNSC ships holding station around Gamma that flagged the Sun's arrival and immediately opened a channel. So twelve minutes after completing their jump the bridge crew of the

Crimson Sun received an up to date report on the action within the system. Both the Captain and the tactical officer were quickly reading through the report when the ship noticeably lurched from a change in momentum. Donnelley, who had been on his way to the main hangar after pulling himself into armor, was nearly knocked off his feet. After righting himself and reasonably sure that the ship wasn't breaking apart he ran the rest of the way to the hangar.

"All hands all hands," rang from the pac as the gunny ran "be advised, there are covenant on our approach vector to Gamma Iocale. All hands to battle stations, marines prepare to drop. Brace for maneuvers."

Donnelley still had one foot in the air when he heard that last part, and the jolt that followed happened only a fraction of a second later. He was thrown off of his one grounded foot and slammed into one of the bulkheads. After picking himself up he continued at a much more cautious pace, but the bridge crew didn't put the ship into any more serious maneuvers. He ducked through one more door and found himself on the main level of the frigate's main hangar bay. Maintenance techs and marines were running everywhere, each trying to get somewhere different. Working his way through the crowd he spotted Mixer near their appointed dropships.

"Good, Donnelley, you made it. We're still dropping in two pelicans. I'll be with first section on this bird," she said patting the hull of the ship beside her "and I want you and second on the other one."

"Got it ma'am, best of luck."

"You too Gunny."

He crossed the rather narrow walkway between the open tail sections of each of the craft and stepped onto the ramp of his own ride. He watched the swirling mass of faces and every time he saw one of his marines he would pluck them right out of the crowd and pull them up the ramp. Suddenly the the mass of UNSC personnel turned into a panicked mob of people of all ages, the metal walls became a red sky and the woman who's hand he was holding was clutching onto her child for dear life. His heart sunk when he remembered that most of these people wouldn't make it.

"Are you alright Gunny?" the woman asked. Her face turned from that of a scared mother into a marine's he recognized, and the child in her arms blurred and came back into focus as an assault rifle. He was holding onto Corporal Samantha Bradley's wrist, still aboard the Crimson Sun.

"Ya, I'm fine. You have everything packed?"

"Yes." She replied, the question still in her eyes.

"Good, get it stowed then get the second section on the bird, I still need to secure my gear."

He stayed on the ramp apparently watching the crowd, but in reality he was trying his best to calm himself down. Once the Corporal was back on the ramp he turned back to the troop bay, picked up his pack and strapped it down at the base of a nearby seat. Then he waited. It

wasn't long until all eleven of the marines in second section were on board, and he radioed Mixer that they were ready.

"Hold tight." She told him over the radio "Word is the Sun will be moving fast over Locale as we are dropped. Say ten minutes."

After relaying the news to the rest of the section there was noting to do but, well, hold tight. It was quiet in the ship and there were the occasional sounds from the hanger or techs conversing or someone dropping something, but overall it was quiet. And Donnelley was far too anxious to sit in silence. Looking around the troop bay he watched everyone one as they all prepared to hit the line once again. All of them were veterans, not just of Brakenor, and they all knew what conditions on the ground would be like. But still the eleven marines, most of which he hadn't known until a month ago, were all keeping their calm much better than he was. For some reason that made him smile, so he sat back concentrating on that positive feeling.

The ten minutes passed much more quickly than he had thought, the pilot brought up the ramp and sealed the compartment. A few seconds of nothing passed and then he felt the Pelican's engine's fire up and they were moving. The atmosphere had to have been evacuated from the hangar and the doors already open because as soon as the engines were online he could tell they were moving quickly, not slowing or stopping for the doors to open. There were a few minutes of slight acceleration and an overall smooth ride before the Pelican bucked and shook, they had entered that atmosphere.

Other than the expected turbulence their decent went smoothly, ending with a soft touchdown. Donnelley breathed a sigh of relief, but he still felt that the whole thing had been anticlimactic. He stood and had his pack slung on his shoulder and his MA5 ready before the ramp had even opened a crack. When the ramp did open the light was almost pure white and it caused the Gunny to shield his eyes. Once the ramp was down, and he could open his eyes, he could see that they had landed in a large clearing in a thickly grown forest. Stepping out of the bird he could see the rolling blue clouds of Gamma hanging overhead in a blue sky tinted violet.

Mixer and her section were already unloading and moving away from the landing area. Donnelley caught up to the Lieutenant and followed her past the Pelicans, past the field tents containing any number of things, and right into an open air tent with dozens of officers and staff under it. A Staff Sergeant noticed their approach and waved them over. "What do you need Lieutenant?"

"I was told to report to Major General Atradies."

The Staff Sergeant bit his lower lip and nodded. "Strange, I'll see who I can get to see you." He disappeared into the tent. A minute or so later a Colonel stepped up to the pair.

"Lieutenant Mixer I presume?"

"Yes sir."

"I am Colonel Van Dam. General Atradies was made aware by UNICOM that your platoon was being sent here and has assigned you to me."

"Ok Colonel, where do you want us and what are we up against?"

"That's just the thing Lieutenant, you're a platoon with no other attachments. All I was told was that you were 'Shock Infantry', I'm not exactly sure what to do with you." He picked up a tacpad from a table nearby and switched it over to a satellite view the surface of Iocale. Holding it so Mixer could see he zoomed in on a portion just outside a city that was heavily wooded. Running out from the city was a small road that crossed a river over what looked like a damn and disappeared off screen. "We're in this clearing here." He said pointing out a spot not too far from the city. "Most of my regiment is held up in the city and it's outskirts. The company I have to spare I've been sending on patrols near the highway looking for a Covenant force somewhere between here and the river."

"So now we're going to scout it out?" Donnelley asked eying the map. The Colonel had said that the small road was a highway, that put things in perspective. There was a lot of ground to cover between the city and the river. "How do you know there are Covies out there?"

"They were pushing into the city from the highway and we pushed them back. And we know they didn't go north because there was an armored regiment not that far from that side of the road. And yes, you're my scouts, just call in if you see anything big. Also we had some ODSTs drop about six hours ago, a number of their pods were off course and landed in that area, so be cautious of friendlies."

"Any other information Colonel?" Mixer asked.

"Yes, this fleet is headed by brutes."

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Roman Kray gently moved the branch out of his way with his left hand. He slowly moved under it and kept his hand in place until Lazlo pushed up on it as well. So far they had been practically crawling through the woods for nearly five hours and it was hot, humid and hot. That was something he had learned about binary star systems, the days lasted a strange amount of time and on moons the heat comes from both the stars and the energy reflected off of the gas giant they were orbiting. Add that to Iocale's high moisture content and you had heat and humidity on a scale no one could imagine, or at least not Kray anyway.

And heat makes you sweat. Brutes can already smell you a mile away, no need to help them out he thought. Mixer had passed down the word on who they were facing and a good number in the platoon were scared. And we have a right to be. I mean we're walking through the woods, a monkey's natural habitat, hunting these things down. Us hunting nine foot tall, meat eating monkeys that don't have enough sense to die when you shoot them. He shuddered as he remembered the vids he had seen of the aliens. Marines had put numerous rounds into them but instead of retreating or even firing back they charged right at the humans and tore them to shreds with their powerful paws.

The whole platoon was stretched out over a nearly one hundred meter wide line keeping an eye out for any movement, which there was a lot of in the woods. Multiple times they had been told to freeze because

someone saw something that looked like animal movement, mostly it was someone seeing one of Iocale's large rodents scurrying about. No one had yet to see anything more dangerous than a mosquito, a species that seemed to somehow travel to and survive on every planet.

Kray slipped and had to hold onto a tree trunk to keep from falling. Looking down to see what was so slick it was actually something in the mud that had caught his attention. There was a depression on the mud, a hoof print the size of his fist, if not a little bigger. It wasn't the only one, the prints carried on out of sight in about the same direction the platoon was moving. Just ahead he saw that a second set of tracks hooked up with the first. Looking to his left he waved to get sergeant Ryan's attention.

"What do you have?" He whispered once he was closer.

"Tracks." Kray whispered back "I think they're jackal's."

"How fresh are they?"

"How the hell should I know? The corps didn't teach me how to read tracks."

"They had to have been made pretty recently, sarge." Lazlo whispered from beside Kray. "They left a deep impression, meaning the ground was pretty wet but not muddy. It still has a lot of give." The marine raised a booted foot to show that he had left a track only slightly shallower than the alien's.

Ryan bit his lower lip as he studied the ground. "I think you're right. You and Lazlo follow these, but stay in sight. If the tracks veer off away from our path tell me but do not follow them." He moved his head from side to side making sure they understood him. Then without another word he cut back across the platoon's line of advance to tell Mixer what they had found.

The two marines looked at each other for a second before Kray shrugged and turned his attention back to the words. They followed the jackals' trail, staying close to their original direction and keeping the same crawling pace as they had before. But now Kray was paying much more attention to where he stepped and tried his best not to make a single noise. Needless to say he sounded nothing like a trainwreck but every little crackle made his heart stop momentarily. After five minutes of near dead silence he couldn't help but open his mouth.

"Where did you learn that" He asked, keeping his voice so low he doubted that Lazlo had even heard him.

"My father and I would always go hunting in the Ural mountains." The other marine replied. Kray felt a little of the tension in his shoulders leave him when he heard the calm in his friend's voice. "Regardless of what the colonies might think not everyone on Earth lives like a king, we needed the food. Jackal's are just another animal in the woods."

"Just big flightless birds."

The tracks continued in roughly the same direction, occasionally jinking to the left or right to pass some of the thicker brush. The

duo found themselves at the base of a steep rise, with the tracks going straight up the slope. After checking to make sure he could still see Lance Corporal Banigan off to their left Kray nodded to Lazlo and started up rise. It was steeper than it looked and the marines found themselves mostly pulling themselves up by their off-hands while pushing with their legs. The hard part wasn't the climb so much as keeping the noise to a minimum.

Once at the top they paused . Lazlo scanned the area at the top of the hill while Kray checked the slope and made sure he could still see a few members of the platoon through the trees. They pressed on and soon found out that the hill itself wasn't all that big and they could see the reverse slope through a few more branches. The hill overlooked a low area where the trees thinned to the point that only a few tall shrubs dotted an area roughly fifty meters in diameter. Lazlo tapped him on the shoulder and pointed to the ground under their feet. The jackal tracks were close together and ran right up to the tree where one veered to the right and the other just disappeared. Kray opened his mouth but Lazlo put a finger to his lips and pointed up with the other hand. Looking up he saw a jackal sitting on a branch the size of his arm two meters above his head.

Kray lifted his M7 for a shot but Lazlo pushed it down and pointed to Kray's combat knife. He cocked an eyebrow, wondering why he had to climb up the tree when he remembered that Lazlo's was in his pack, big oversight. Shaking his head and holding back a sigh he silently placed the M7 on the ground, unsheathed his knife and pulled himself up to the lowest branch. He move slowly and carefully, any sound or movement would tip off the jackal just out of arm's reach.

Luckily for him it was intent on watching the lowlands with it's needle rifle propped on top of a branch. The jackal was now within Kray's reach and he was about to grab it's harness and pull it down when it fired. A single needle left the rifle and disappeared int the lowland brush while the crack of the shot spurred Kray into action. He grabbed the neck of it's harness, pulled it off the branch shrieking, and sunk his knife all the way to the hilt into it's neck. As it gurgled and died in his arms there was the sound of a plasma pistol firing not to far away, and it was answered in kind by a burst of automatic fire.

"Contact report!" The lieutenant called over the radio.

"Vostok, we we're tracking down a pair of jackals. One's dead on the hill, no eyes on the second."

"You don't have to worry about the second one." The voice was unfamiliar to Kray, it definitely didn't belong to anyone in the platoon. Looking up from the still twitching alien he noticed a dark figure moving through the brush in the lowland, a figure in ODST armor. "But that bastard in the tree nearly hit me."

"And just who am I talking to?"

"Gunnery Sergeant Geoffrey Dees, Tenth Shock Troop Battalion."

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**Thank you for reading

>The Platoon is back and already they run into an old friend. I can guarantee that there will be a lot of action coming up.

Note: Kepler 47 is a real circumbinary star system recently discovered by the Kepler Space Telescope and it's Neptune sized gasgiant is indeed in the zone where liquid water could be found. The name of the planet as well as the moon itself are purely from my imagination.

2. Locate, Observe, Destroy

Locate, Observe, Destroy

"We were on the Gorgon, out on patrol when the call from Iocale came in." Gunnery Sergeant Geoffrey Dees was sitting underneath a tree with his, helmet off and his back to it's thick trunk. After he and Kray had killed the two jackal scouts the platoon took a position around and on the hill overlooking the low ground they had found the ODST in. Now Lieutenant Mixer, Gunny Donnelley and a few of the closer marine were listening while he told his story. "The Covie fleet was starting it's push back to Gamma when the Gorgon got into position to drop us. The best thing I could come up with was that as we started to drop, a Covie ship made it in close enough to force our ride to move out of position. Now instead of landing just outside the city a number of us hit out here in the boonies. That was almost eleven hours ago."

"And you haven't found anyone else in that time?" Mixer asked.

"According to what you said and the map" he said tapping the tacpad in her hands that displayed the same satellite image that Colonel Van Dam had shown her "it's about ten kilometers between the rally point and the river. You're talking about nearly a hundred square kilometers of forest. So yeah, you guys are the first people I've seen. And man am I glad to see you guys, and not just because I've been alone in the woods."

"And why is that?" Donnelley questioned, cocking his head to the side.

"Believe it or not you lot fight better than any other regular jarheads I've run into." He responded before taking a sip from his canteen. "But you aren't regular marines anymore are you? Shock infantry was it?"

"Ya."

"That means you're heavy hitters, right?"

"To be honest, we're not quite sure what it means." Mixer said rubbing the back of her neck. "Colonel Van Dam sent us out here pretty much as scouts looking for a Covenant ground force."

"Thing is though," Donnelley said while turning to look her in the eye "if we spot anything it would take to long to get word back and set up an assault. I'm guessing he expects us to take out everything

we can and only call in the big guns for something, well, bigger."

"Makes sense to me." Dees agreed "You're here pretty much to slow their advance long enough for the forces in the city to get a better hold. Basically kick ass at will."

"So one platoon covers a hundred square kilometers of enemy infested forest? Joy." Mixer rolled her eyes with that last statement. "Any suggestions?"

"If there is a large number of Covies out here, there has to be at lesst one place they're using for a base, and bases need support and supplies." Dees said. "Check all the good sized clearings."

"Also, since the patrols from the highway haven't even run into any patrols we can assume they are deeper in and avoiding it all together. And it's best we look near streams." Donnelley added.

"Why?" asked Dees.

"A few reasons. If they are getting air support or shipping in supplies our ships haven't seen anything moving. That could mean the ships are flying over the river and staying above one of these streams, still under the canopy, until it reaches their base. The other two are much more simple, access to water and if any of their patrols get lost they just follow the stream right back home."

Mixer nodded and looked down at the map. "There are three streams within half a kilk of here. I want to break up by squads. First squad will keep heading to the river but break off and follow this stream once it hits this clearing." she said pointing to a location not to far ahead of their position on the map. "Second will head to the geographic north and once they hit their stream they should follow it to the river, and Third will do the same but heading south. Fourth will stay here and hold this spot. Once each squad has covered roughly a kilometer along the water they will come back here. If you do find anything don't use your radios, send a runner. Lastly I want Nelms on overwatch here on the hill. Dees can round out Second squad."

"I'd be delighted to."

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It had been an hour since the Lieutenant had split up the squads into smaller search parties and Second squad still hadn't run across their designated waterway. That was Simply because Kostoff (and Dees who absolutely insisted he was a tag along and not the one in charge, no matter what the regulations said) had kept the five of them moving at the same cautious pace. That had caused some grumbling and whispered bitching the whole way. No matter how much they bitch about it, the Staff Sergeant though, they still know it keeps marines alive. Hell maybe we can sneak up on another patrol. But they have a right to gripe. I forget who said 'if there is no griping, something is very wrong'.

He removed his duty cap and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. It was hot, maybe not everywhere on Gamma

Iocale but it was almost like a jungle where they were. Taking a look around he saw that his squad was soaked through with sweat, most of them even panting, and even Dees seemed to be tiring in his armor. They had to stop for rest soon, otherwise one of them might collapse from heat stroak. But they had to be close to the stream by now, question was were they close enough to keep going or did they have to stop?

After rechecking the map and comparing their time out to his rough estimate of their pace he decided to keep moving, _It can't be too far_. So they continued on through the brush as silently as they could manage. But after ten more minutes and still no sign of the stream he was beginning to doubt his decision. He let out a low to get everyone's attention, pulled out his canteen then pointed at his wrist and held up five fingers, five minute break. But while Saucedo, the farthest forward of them, was looking over his shoulder at Kostoff he took one last step and seemed to fall right through the ground from the NCO's point of view.

The five marines all bolted to where their comrade had been standing moments before and Kostoff got there first. His worry melted away and he couldn't help but laugh as he saw Saucedo stand up in the hip deep water, completely soaked. He held out his hand to help the marine back onto the bank. "About time you took a bath."

The sodden marine clamped onto his wrist and stared him in the eye. "You could use one yourself."

"Yeah," Harriman said from behind him "the Covies can smell you coming a mile away."

"Ok" the NCO said noticing the clearing across the small body of water and pulling Saucedo up "we found the stream. Take five minutes to rest, but stay in the trees."

Kostoff walked about four meters from the bank and sat at the base of a tree. All kidding aside, if there had been any covenant in the area when saucedo had taken that dunk all six of them would have been screwed. But there was no one around that they could see, not even in the clearing. He turned his attention across the water, after all that was what Mixer had them all looking for. The stream had to be close to ten meters across, maybe more, and the far bank rose a few feet above the water with a thin line of trees between it and the open area. But it wasn't choked full of high grass or brush, it had been genuinely cleared by human hands, probably by the people who had lived in the cluster of buildings sitting in the middle.

It looked to have been a small farm of some kind with neatly plowed fields, some of the even bare dirt, and what was almost certainly a barn. The other buildings had to have been the main house, a pen of some kind for livestock and what could have been a tool shed. He was just beginning to think about what had happened to the family that had lived there when Dees tapped him on the shoulder, time to go. He reached for his rifle and cast one more glance across the water. What he saw made him grab onto Dees arm and pull him down.

Cautiously coming out of the trees on the far side of the clearing was a group of four jackals without shields and carrying long rifles. Two stuck close to the wood line and began a slow circle of the area while the other two approached the house. By the time they entered

the whole squad had ducked behind a tree or a bush and they were all watching, hoping the place was indeed deserted. After a few tense moments the jackals reappeared and not a single shot had been fired, that was good news at least. They all watched for a few more moments as the aliens completed their search and all met in the center of one of the small fields. After a small discussion, two began putting small stakes in the ground while the others climbed up two of the taller trees.

Still Kostoff didn't let anyone move, they were hear to find covenant and he was curious what they were up to. It wasn't long before they all picked up on a characteristic whine of a Covenant vehicle getting louder and coming from down stream. The Sergeant put the trunk of the tree between him and the water and lowered himself to the ground, leaving himself just enough room to see. As the sound peaked the twin hulls of a Spirit dropship came gliding over the water, turret tracking along their bank. Kotooff's heart was pounding in his chest, but he stayed rooted in position, they all did.

Once the turret and the tail of the ship was past them it slowly rose above the tops of the trees, floated over the clearing and descended again. As it came down Kostoff noticed that six of the Covenant's weirdly shaped crates were held between the prongs of it's hull by anti-grav fields. when the ship was hovering only a meter or so off the cleared ground the crates were dropped and it's sides opened, disgorging a dozen grunts and two brutes. He watched as one of the massive, ape-like aliens raised it's head to sniff at the air before turning around and barking orders at the grunts, which busied themselves with moving and unloading the crates.

Turning around to put his back against the trunk Kostoff motioned his squad closer. "It looks like they are setting up camp here. Punske, run back to the hill and spread the word that Mixer has her target."

The marine nodded once and quickly left. Kostoff took another look across the stream. The crates had already been moved away from the fields and placed near the buildings and grunts were already carrying individual pieces of equipment into the barn. Motion on the roof caught his attention and he saw the two jackals had scaled to the top of the barn and were setting up what looked conspicuously like an antenna. This was most definitely going to be a base of some sort.

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Vik was panting by the time she and the rest of the platoon had made it to Second squad's position. Jocelyn had made it back to the hill pretty quickly and Sergeant Ryan had picked her and Lazlo to run after Mixer and Donnelley. She moved as fast as she could and Mixer had moved even faster, so now she was cursing the comms blackout as much as everyone else. There was enough negative energy being thrown off by the marines that she could pretty much feel it. But the rest was welcome none the less.

She was close to Mixer as she got a report out of Kostoff. "They were already setting up shop by the time I sent out Punske. Since then another three dropships have come by, all with crates and one carrying troops as well. Another six grunts, four jackals and three more brutes. The grunts have been working on the barn, mostly

carrying in what looks like com equipment and then put a methane station in the pen before sealing it up. When the third load came in the dropship went to ground and is still sitting in the field. The big problem though is what landed after that," he ducked his head under a branch and pointed across the stream "a _Seraph_ fighter."

A fighter, Vik couldn't believe what he had said and lowered herself to see through the foliage. Yep, there it was, one honest to god covenant fighter craft. While Seraphs didn't preform their best in atmosphere they were still faster and more heavily armed than a Banshee. Not to mention a bitch to take down because of their energy shield. It was best to blow I up while it was on the ground and vulnerable, but that went without saying. The thing that irked her the most was "How did it get here without anyone noticing?"

She froze. She hadn't meant to say that out loud. But Mixer's lip curved up in a small smile and she nodded. "Good question Vik. Best I can come up with is that the navy is too busy to bother with one fighter and Major General Attradies already has his hands full. Total Covie count?"

"Eighteen grunts, eight jackals, and seven brutes counting the pilots." Kostoff had already counted, and probably recounted, and the numbers came out quick and confidant.

"Thirty-three to our twenty-four." Mixer said, after doing the math. "But we have surprise on our side."

"I would normally say that's more than enough, but I'm worried about those brutes." Donnelley commented without taking his eyes off the clearing. "You never know what they're gonna do."

Vik already found her mind in motion, creating the skeleton of a plan. If there was coms equipment in the barn then the Covies were most likely listening in on UNSC frequencies, so Mixer was right to call for a coms blackout. They still had the element of surprise, which really did go a long way but Donnelley was right, the brutes reacted quickly and aggressively. They had to be taken out quickly or the whole thing could turn around on the marines. The plan in her head was to split up into their two sections, cross the stream and stick the aliens in a pincer while Nasri took care of the ships and coms with his rockets. She opened her mouth to start hinting at the idea when Mixer unknowingly cut her off.

"We're gonna put their nuts in a vice. First section will head a little upstream then cross and second will cross downstream, That'll give Nasri a great shot at those ships. I also want their coms knocked out quickly. Nelms will stay here with Bailey and listen for the confirmation that both sections are in position. His shot will be the cue." She paused and looked each of her squad leaders in the eyes. "Lets get to it."

The Lieutenant and Kostoff stood and started pulling the people from first section while Donnelley and Ryan split up to do the same. The Sergeant disappeared into the brush heading east, upstream, while the Gunny turned downstream to find marines in his section. Vik had been the closest and she stood as he neared and started to move west with him, but he held up a hand to stop her. He stopped right in front of her and looked her in the eye, not glaring or staring her down, there seemed to be curiosity in them.

"It looked like you had something to say."

"It was nothing Gunny, just an idea." She said.

"we're on our own right now, so any input other than "God damn its hot" would be nice to have." He said grinning just a little.

"Well the Lieutenant covered everything I thought of." She replied, smiling at his little joke. "She even one upped me, I didn't even think about having sniper fire or how to start it."

He nodded in understanding then started making his way west, Vik in tow. "I told her you were smart. Glad to know I was right."

"Who? The Lieutenant?" She asked waving for Kray and Vostok to follow them.

"Yeah. You seem to think things through more than those two behind you." Either Kray or Vostok grunted, she couldn't tell which one, but that little insult made her smile again. "I actually wanted to put Banigan with Kostoff, since his Lance is our sniper he'd need a dedicated second, and promote one of you three and have you be Ryan's second. Top of my list was your name. But we had to load up before I could send in any official recommendation."

Vik didn't know what to say. A thank you seemed appropriate but it just didn't feel right to say. So she stayed silent, hoping he knew that she appreciated what he was saying. Now wasn't the time for chatting about her career or being social, I'll thank him later... if there is a later. They had gone maybe a hundred or so meters past the edge of the clearing when Donnelley stopped beside the water. They waited another handful of minutes for Ryan and the other half of the section to appear. Then the eleven marines carefully lowered themselves into the water and started to cross.

The water came that up to her stomach was cool, a blessed relief from the oppressive heat and humidity. She found that odd, she had always thought that this sort of climate would go with a jungle, not with oak and cedar-like trees. She shook her head as she climbed up the other bank, now was not a time for a planetary survey or a time for deep thought. Focus was the name of the game. So she focused on keeping her steps quiet, focused on taking shallow breaths, focused on watching the trees for movement or alien metals.

The section fanned out into a single, loose, line heading back east to the clearing. The trees began to thin out and soon enough Vik had a great view of the open area, including both of the Covenant vehicles and an edge of the barn. Without a word everyone slowed to a snails pace and tried their best to get to a spot that would be easy to move through once the shooting started. She was surprised to see the twin barrels of an M19 rocket launcher appear in her peripheral vision. Looking to her right she could see the rest of Omar Nasri as he moved the launcher back and forth between targets.

Donnelley came up behind them and squatted next to the rocket jockey whispering so softly Vik couldn't hear him. Nasri nodded and the Gunny pulled out a reload from Nasri's pack and held it ready in one hand while he pointed at something in the clearing still whispering. The marine nodded once more and the Gunny reached up and pressed the

side of his helmet. Two clear beeps sounded over the coms, they were ready and now the Lieutenant and Nelms knew it.

She refocused on the activity around the farm, keeping an ear open for Nelms' shot. She was squatting almost exactly between the rear ends of each of the ships. The doors to the barn were wide open, but she couldn't get a look inside to see how many aliens were in there. There were still several grunts unloading crates on the other side of the ship and she saw some enter the barn carrying even more of the covenant's strange equipment. As for the brutes and the jackals there wasn't much of a sign except for a pair of the bird-like creatures following the treeline to the north and another she saw sitting in one of the trees near the bank of the stream. Her battle rifle slid up to her shoulder and looking through it's scope she laid the cross-hairs over the one in the tree and waited.

There was another double click emitted from her earpiece, the Lieutenant was ready. It was all up to Nelms to fire the starting gun now. One of the brutes appeared from behind the seraph and was stomping it's way to the barn door that grabbed Vik's attention when the rolling sound of a shot broke the silence. The brute's head flew off of it's massive shoulder's in a spray of dark red blood, but it was saved falling to the ground and swung around on a piece of neck still connected to it as the brute fell. Vik felt the exhaust from one of the rockets as she sighted in on the jackal again and firing a burst that caused the alien to fall off of it's branch.

She was just registering that the second rocket had flew past her when she heard the first explosion. The rocket had hit the front of the barn just under the antenna setup and now the piece of Covenant equipment was a bunch of twisted metal on the ground. The second hit the seraph right in the exhaust port between it's two tails. The front end ballooned for a millisecond then exploded outward, creating shrapnel that Vik hoped would kill some of the working grunts. Some of the smaller aliens began to panic and ran into the open and were cut down mercilessly by at least five separate marines, including her.

The rest, though, kept their composure and sought cover as more still spilled out of the barn along with the rest of the brutes. Checking her left to make sure that the jackals had been dealt with the third rocket wooshed past her and slammed into the cockpit section leaving the dropship as two smoking, disconnected tubes. With smoke and metal between her and the barn and both jackals on her left left twitching in the dirt she decided it was time to move forward, and everyone else seemed to have the same idea.

All eleven of the marines of the second section charged out of the trees moving for cover behind the smoking pile of junk that Nasri had left. A handful had moved to the fighter after it had been permanently grounded and now the rest moved forward, most moving close to what was left of the spirit. Vik stuck to the left tail of the fighter and crouched hoping the smoke on the other side wasn't so thick on the ground. It was dark black and dense, she couldn't see anything below or between the vehicles but by now one of the covenant troops was firing blindly through the cloud. Vik fired a burst back at where she thought the fire was coming from, all it did was cause even more plasma to fly through the smokescreen.

She was thinking about tossing a grenade through the smoke when the

wind picked up, blowing from the west. Suddenly the smoke wasn't in front of her but all around her, causing her eyes to water. She forced herself not to breath too deeply but heard at least one marine coughing over the gunfire. Then the smoke was pushed passed her and she found herself staring at three grunts, a jackal, and a brute just exiting the barn. Instinctively her finger tightened on the trigger and the grunt closest to the fighter's hulk dropped to the dirt, but she beat it there trying to duck under the incoming fire.

The air above her head lit up like a Christmas tree as plasma of different color flew one way and hot lead flew the other. The grunts were riddled with bullets within seconds but everything that was aimed at the jackal bounced off of it's shield. Still prone Vik had an open shot at the point it's shield didn't cover, the feet. She pulled her rifle up, aimed and with a pull of the trigger the jackal fell forward screaming profanities in it's own language. That was before more rifle fire cut it off of course.

The breeze had died and the smoke was starting to collect into a cloud between the ships again, so Vik moved forward trying to see through it. She reached the edge of the cloud, took a deep breath and held it as she walked through. As she cleared the cloud she almost walked into a mass of stinking flesh and gray hair.

"SHIT!" she screamed as she dove to the ground to her left. The Brute had to have been surprised to have her walk right up to him as she had but it had started to swing it's... his plasma rifle around to bash in her skull. The weapon flew through now empty air and missed her head by a bare few centimeters before hitting the fighter's hull with a very loud clang that shattered the rifle's case and caused it to spark and die. Now pissed at missing, weaponless and it's enemy on the ground the ape attempted to stomp on her. Seeing this Vik rolled back into the smoke as fast as she could, got to her knees and emptied her clip into the area the brute had been.

The alien roared and vik let out a whoop of excitement, she had hit it. It wasn't until she saw the large shape moving through the smoke that she realized hitting a brute, even multiple times didn't mean she had killed it. But even if she hadn't have been celebrating the brute would have hit her, it was just moving too fast. It came in low on all fours, roaring as it ran into her with it's shoulder driving the air from her lungs and pushing her out of the smoke. She landed on her back looking up at the snarling behemoth as it gloated over her, chest heaving. There were several bleeding bullet wounds in it's bare chest, five maybe and the beast was still standing.

Jesus, these guys are harder to kill than I thought. How can it take that many hits and still manage to move, let alone take me down? The thought served to snap her back into reality, she was in a very bad position. The brute was reaching down to grab her, but it was moving so slowly. In the blink of an eye her M6 was off her hip and put three quick rounds into it's knee. As tough as brutes were three 12.7mm rounds shattered bone and tore apart the ligaments and muscles around the joint causing more damage than the alien could handle. The brute roared again, in a mix of pain and rage as it fell to the ground at Vik's feet. She aimed the pistol between her feet and put two more rounds into it's screaming face.

She lay there a second, slowly getting her breath back and gleefully filling her lungs. She closed her eyes and let the feeling of relief

carry her away for a moment before opening them again. By then her section was pushing forward and Kray was standing over her and offered her a hand up when she opened her eyes. She took the hand and he pulled her to her feet and waited for her to pick up her rifle and reload before pressing on without a word. He was afraid she thought, checking the rifle over. Afraid for me? Maybe. Everyone in this platoon practically needs each other to stay sane now. —

On the other side of the smoke again she saw that they had met up with the first section and a number of marines entering the house and a few more about to clear the animal pen. Most though had taken up positions around the barn and were trading a lot of fire with the forces still inside. However no one could get a clear shot at anything inside and there was enough plasma heading their way that nobody could get close enough to use a grenade.

A conventional grenade anyway.

Donelley stood off to her right, with a bit of an angle into the barn through the door and Nasri was crouching next to him. The Gunny had taken the M319 Grenade Launcher off of his back and with a nod to the rocket jockey fired it. The 40mm grenade arced through the door and bounced off the far wall then it was out of sight. It exploded inside and Vik used the gap in the Covenant's fire to move past Donnelley and get a line of sight into the barn. As she took her first look Nasri fired his fourth rocket and the wall by the door turned into a mass of flying splinters and the Gunny put another grenade through the new hole.

The grenade went off near the back and it's effects were still blocked by the smoke from the rocket hit. But out of the smoke came a grunt skidding across the ground. At first Vik thought that the explosion had thrown it into the open but it kept moving, running into what was left of the door-frame and spinning out into open still screaming. Pushing it was a high pressure stream of gas coming from it's back, the grenade must have ripped off his methane rig, more likely part of it. It came to a stop near the spirit and Kray put a bust into it as five marines followed the grenade into the barn.

There was a brief sound of gunfire and then someone called "Clear!"

"The pen's clear too!"

That just left the house, and all Eyes turned to it. A single marine from Donnelley's squad came out the door looking at the object in his hands. When he noticed everyone watching him he cleared his throat.

"It's clear."

"Nothing ran out of the clearing." Mixer announced looking over the crowd. "Did we lose anyone?" No one spoke up. They hadn't lost a single marine? That was the best news anyone of them had heard in about a month. The Lieutenant had a huge smile on her face. "Damn fine work marines. Now put out the fires we started so the whole barn doesn't go up in flames." She waved the marine from the house over.

"What have you got there Lutz?"

"It's a camera ma'am." He said sheepishly.

"A camera hm? Well this does seem like a good time for a picture. Why not set it up?"

"Sounds good ma'am." He said smiling and ran off.

With the fires doused and the area clear Mixer called the platoon together and told them they were taking a picture together. Most felt like they were on top of the world after the action was over and seemed to think it was a good idea but a few others grumbled, that was until Mixer threatened to shoot them if they weren't in the picture. Gunnery Sergeant Dees offered to hold the camera and take the picture but the Lieutenant threatened him too. Finally Lutz found a box to set the camera on, lined it up, pressed the button and ran.

"Everyone say cheese."

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**Thank you for reading. **

The platoon really did just have their first victory, and without a single casualty. Now don't worry, I haven't gone soft on them and there is still plenty of action to come.

3. Knee Deep

Knee Deep

The days on Gamma Iocale were much longer than on Earth or Reach, around thirty-eight earth hours. The only platoon of shock infantry on the moon had attacked a covenant forward operations base sometime close to the local midday. Lieutenant Mixer had everyone loaf around the farm for the next hour, refilling their canteen from the stream and generally taking it easy. But an hour was stretching the time they had, if any Covenant forces were close they would have heard the fight or could now see the twin clouds of thick, black smoke that were now billowing high into Iocale's purple tinted sky. And someone was bound to notice that thirty-three Covenant troops had stopped responding to anything on the coms.

But while everyone was enjoying their short break in the air conditioned comfort of the farmhouse, or sleeping in the shade of the barn (clear of corpses of course) Mixer and her council of war met in a small room in the house. Donnelley thought it was probably an office, with a sturdy desk who's metal frame covered in cheap, peeling wood now supported Mixer's weight as well as the terminal on the top and a single window letting in the only light in the room. He, Kostoff and Ryan stood facing her, nearly taking up the whole width of the room from one dark paneled wall to the other.

He knew by now what Mixer would want to know, terrain, possible location of the Covenant force, estimate on their reaction time, and planning their next three or four moves. He watched, surprised, as she did something new. She set her helmet on the desk and undid her ponytail, letting her black hair fall across her shoulders as she smiled broadly. "Ok boys, I am in a really good mood, so don't spoil it with bad news. How are we doing on amo?"

honestly all three on the NCOs were taken aback by her cheery mood. They had grown so accustomed to working with dreary eyed and unsmiling officer that seeing her actually happy, even beaming, was just... odd. Kostoff was the first to recover and he cleared his throat. "Negligible loss. Mostly they used about one magazine and only four or five used more than that. But Nasri used all the rockets he had been carrying."

"Ok so have two of the boys bust out the reloads they were carrying. Other than that?"

"we're golden."

It didn't seem possible but her smile broadened. "Great. Now it's safe to say we need to leave her before any Covies come looking. Any ideas on how long that will be?"

"If any of their patrols had been close enough to hear the gunfire or see the smoke we would have a dropship breathing down our necks by now." Donnelley commented as he leaned against the wall. "But they'll get suspicious when they call and no one here answers the phone. I honestly don't know when that will be or how long it would take for them to come check it out. When they come it may just be a small group of infantry but it could be a dropship or another fighter scanning with thermal. Either way we should be long gone by then."

Mixer crossed her arms and tilted her head to the side, staring at him with her green eyes. "Again, how long?"

"If we're being cautious?" He said rolling his eyes back and trying his best to remember everything he could remember about Covenant operating procedures. She hadn't put him on the spot exactly, but without knowing where the Covenant in the area were made it hard to come up with any reasonable estimate. And somehow that simple question stung, in part because of her tone. But that wasn't all, he just didn't know what else caused it. "If they are close to the river and send a dropship we're looking at maybe half an hour."

"Damn, and I said an hour." She smiled again and shook her head. "Now our job was to find where the main force was, not to kill everything out here. And I know that we couldn't let them set up a base this close to Van Dam's troops but we need to find the rest before they find us. Ideas?"

Ryan raised his hand. "I have been thinking about that ma'am. You said that they took the highway out of the city but were blocked from going north and that no one near the road itself had seen them. And since the dropship came up the stream I think it's safe to assume that they are close to the river."

"Ditto." Kostoff said pulling a Sweet Williams cigar out of his pocket and stuck it between his teeth. Donnelly raised an eyebrow he was pretty sure the shorter man couldn't see. Kostoff had been smoking them more often than he had ever seen in their years together and he had never known him to smoke inside. "But I don't think a force that was big enough to try to take the city would be able to move too far through these woods."

"So we're looking for clearings, or at least more open ground near

the north end of the river." She hesitated and lowered her gaze to the floor before looking back up but seemed a little shaken. "All of you go sit down and have a cool drink. In ten minutes we're going to pick up and follow the stream to the river. Dismissed."

Donnelley stayed leaning against the wall and kept his eyes on Mixer as Ryan and Kostoff turned and walked through the door. Once they were gone he closed the door and fixed Mixer with his gaze again. She was looking at him but really past him, avoiding his eyes. "You're not very good at hiding things Lieutenant." He said keeping his voice level and soft. "What's wrong?"

She closed her eyes and turned her head so he couldn't see her face. "You are dismissed Gunny." An order was an order but he could hear that she was choking up. So he pressed.

"I'm standing right here until you tell me." He said crossing his arms.

"Go away Eric!"

She was still choking up but the shout took him by surprise and he nearly jumped. Maybe I shouldn't have been that blunt he thought. Switching tactics he crossed the gap between them and gently placed a hand on her right shoulder. She shrugged his hand off and still had her head turned away, refusing to meet his gaze or even let him see the emotion that was inevitably shown on her face. He softened his tone and lowered his voice. "I just want to be sure you're alright. If it was something small you know you don't need to hide it, and if its something else..."

"It was nothing." She managed to say quietly. "Just for a second, a bare second I saw Lai standing there with you. These little meetings started with you, Kostoff, Dees and him and he's the only one not here now. And in that second I forgot he was dead."

"Look at me. Mixer, please look at me." He stood there for a few silent seconds while she sat unmoving. He was about to say something else when she slowly turned her head to look up at him, her eyes tearing up. "You're not alone you know. All of us have been seeing things like that. The guys that were with Derrick keep going back to a massacre they saw in the city, Kray especially. Vik still has nightmares about waking up and finding no one left, Punske admits that every so often she can feel herself crashing a warthog all over again. And just seven hours ago I... I was back on the tarmac pulling as many people on board as I could. It's not something any of us want to relive, not something we want to live with but so far we have all managed to stay sane, in the here and now because we are surrounded by people who know what it was like. People who are going through the same things we are. People who care. And we're here for you."

He stood in silence again for a time that felt like ages. As much as he talked about opening up about her pain he hadn't said a word to anyone about it. Honestly he was just as scared as her, just as scarred and just as stubborn. Finally realizing he had nothing left to say he gave her a slight nod and turned. Opening the door he heard the Lieutenant move and he paused in the door frame.

"Thank you Eric." She whispered.

"Not a problem... ma'am."

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Nelms was now a firm believer that an S2 had to be about the worst weapon to carry through the woods, it was large, heavy and close to useless for any close in work. The only thing that could be worse would be SPNKR because it was just as big, heavier and even worse to use at close ranges. Which was exactly why both he and Nasri had put the big weapons on their backs and stuck to their M7s when Mixer had them pull up stakes. There had been some grumbling that she had promised them an hour but he had stayed silent, there were Covenant out there and she was being cautious. Moving was the right call in his book.

And move they did. They started heading northwest from the farm for the first hour, moving as fast as caution allowed. Then turned to the west and continued to in that direction for another hour without so much as a single break in the rising heat of the day. Most of that time Nelms had to bend just that much more to get the stock of his rifle under the low branches. Now they were taking a needed rest under the canopy at a point Nelms had to say was a little less than a kilometer north and two kilometers west of the farm and no one had seen or heard a single sign of the Covenant.

He picked up his canteen and shook it, listening to the small amount of water that was left swish around inside. The day was getting hotter and they had left the stream far behind in necessity, haste and the promise of river bearing water to drink and aliens to kill. And even though he'd filled it up before they left, Bailey hadn't thought of that and now the two of them were sharing a single canteen. With an exasperated sigh Nelms unscrewed the cap and swallowed a mouthful of water and looked down the neck at about two more mouthfuls. Shaking his head, he put the cap back on and closed his eyes.

"How much is left?" The big marine was sitting on a large root in front of him and his perpetual cheer seemed to have faded.

"Not much thanks to your stupid ass." He couldn't keep the venom from his voice. "Honestly, didn't I tell you to fill up when we crossed the stream?" The fact that it had been because of Bailey that he had been wounded once almost slipped out, but he managed not to bring up that painful memory. Bailey didn't respond and the sniper cracked open an eye out of curiosity. The big man was staring at the ground between them and working his jaw.

"That's ok. I'll have to leech off of someone else soon anyway." Bailey finally replied grinning like an idiot.

"You are such a parasite." He couldn't help but smile at his friend's sense of humor.

"I'm living the high life while half of everything you have goes to me? Yeah, I can live with that."

The two of them sat laughing under the foliage but sobered up when Sergeant Kostoff whistled and spun his hand over his head. It was time to get moving again, the river was waiting for them. Nelms

stood, careful his rifle didn't snag on anything like it had done several times before and tossed the canteen to Bailey. "Last call buddy."

Once again the platoon spread out into a staggered line with him near it's center. And as they pressed on he saw the flanking squads falling farther and farther behind the center. His mind flashed back to his high school and his class on pre space age human history. Famous general, what was his name? Hannibal? Yeah, that sounded right. Hannibal formed his army into the same crescent shape they were in now and allowed his center to retreat behind his flanks and basically encircled his enemy. He remembered thinking it had to suck being the center of the formation, and now he was standing at it's center.

And now he was standing knee deep in muck.

That took him by surprise. One moment he had been trudging along with the rest of the platoon on solid ground, now there was standing water up to his knees and his boots sunk deep into the mud with every step. The canopy had gotten so thick that it was all but impossible for him to see the sky and looking behind them he could see ripples for several meters up to the point the water met dry land. Checking the mission clock he noticed he had to have been spacing out for at around five minutes and it had to have been deep enough that the feel of the water seeping into his boots didn't snap him out of it. Even weirder was the fact that he hadn't walked straight into a tree, tripped, or caused a big enough noise to draw anyone's attention while in that state.

What really irked him was that he even could have a lapse in concentration that bad in a combat zone, It was unprofessional and could have gotten someone killed. He mentally slapped himself awake and really started to take in his surroundings. The term swamp seemed fitting because of the muck, standing water and slight smell of rotting vegetation. There were still trees, many more and denser in fact, than he had seen anywhere else that day but they were they same kind. And everyone agreed it had rained recently because the ground was still soft and moist. To Nelms it made sense that they would run into a swamp, it was the rainy season here and they were moving closer to a river that had been dammed up, it must have overflowed and flooded the surrounding woods.

The mud was sucking him down and each step took more effort than the last. The platoon was still moving forward but looking closer it seemed like everyone was in a daze. Sergeant Kostoff just kept looking straight ahead, never once turning his head to scan the area like he usually did. The Lieutenant had the tacpad in her hand but held it at chest level, not stopping to read it but not putting it away either. And Bailey was close enough for him to see that the big man's eyes had glazed over. It didn't seem like anyone nearby was paying any attention, which makes sense that Bailey ran headlong into a low branch.

Recoiling from the hit the marine snapped back to reality and rubbed his nose where he had hit it. He shook his head and looked over at Nelms, still holding his nose. "Where did that branch come from? And why are my legs wet?" he whispered.

"You weren't paying attention, and I'm not going to call you a moron

for that because I did it too. But take a look around, almost everyone is in a daze."

"But we're still basically in formation. That's just too weird man."

"Tell me about it. Just look sharp and keep an eye out, and ambush would be great right about now. Do me a favor and wake up Saucedo." He said motioning to the marine on the other side of Bailey.

The big man nodded and started pulling himself through the water and muck in that direction as Nelms turned and took two sucking steps in the other direction. The closest person to him was Jennifer Harris, who was just about to walk straight into a tree the size of a warthog wheel. He reached for her shoulder but still in that daze she took another awkward step toward the tree forcing him to pull up his leg and take the biggest step he could without losing his footing. Now that she was within reach again, and one step away from running into the tree he extended his arm... just in time to watch three streaks of whizzing red metal pass between the two of them. He pushed her into the tree and followed her in a dive of his own, hoping to get some cover, yelling "Hostile fire on me!"

His cry seemed to snap everyone out of it and there were a series of splashes as marines dove for cover. But and amidst the shouts that followed he could hear several more loud thunks as something slammed into the tree. Accepting the risk of having his head taken off by enemy fire he peeked around the tree. Six or seven metal spikes, still glowing from the heat, had bored their way into the trunk and were causing the wood to smoke. Other than that the water was still and nothing moved other than the leaves in the wind. That was until several more spikes formed out of thin air and he was forced to duck back behind the tree.

"Report!" Mixer called from behind a tree off to his left.

"Spiker rounds! Can't see where they are coming from." Nelms responded.

"Anyone see brutes?"

"Nothing on our left ma'am."

"I don't see anything to the right."

Nelms cringed, they must be using active camouflage. He had never actually run into any Covenant using this invisibility device but had heard about it just as much as any other jarehead. The thing was he had never heard of a brute using it, only elites who seemed to hoard all the good technology. He gritted his teeth and racked his brain for every bit of information, every rumor he had heard about about invisible aines and after parsing out all the bullshit found one gold nugget. The camouflage distorted the light leaving an odd ripple in the air like a heat mirage.

"Hey Harris, gimme a boost." He said pointing up into the branches of the tree. The petite blond looked at him with disdain then sighed, lowering herself so the water came up to mid thigh and cupped her hands in front of her. He dropped his M7, letting the friction strap catch it and put his right hand on the trunk of the tree and his left

on her shoulder. He had been standing behind the tree too long and the mud had sucked him down much farther than before, but with some effort he got a booted foot into her hands. She started to lift and he straitened his leg until he grabbed hold of a branch and pulled himself up.

After getting his feet on top of the base of the branch he saw the tree split into two separate branches that could both be called trunks. Pulling himself up by another branch he managed to get one booted foot in the split and plant the other on a slightly lower branch. After testing that he wouldn't have to worry about a branch breaking underfoot he settled his shoulder against one of the trunks and pulled the rifle off of his back. The idea had been to scan the area for movement but there was one little flaw in his plan, as he had been climbing the brutes- and there had to be more than one- had started pouring spike in on the marines' positions.

And of course his comrades responded with a hail of gunfire aimed at the general area anyone saw hot metal appearing from. Unfortunately all those bullets had to go somewhere and they were hitting trees causing bark and splinters to fly, whizzing through the foliage, and hitting the surface of the water. That made for a chaotic mess to see through, and it became especially hard when his targets were practically invisible. Is it odd to hate the laws of physics? He asked himself squinting in order to get a clearer view.

Though the firing was not sloppy in the least, and if anyone had lost their nerve it didn't show. No one aimed directly at a muzzle flash, no one broke from cover to pursue a shimmer, all the bursts of fire were short and clean, and most importantly no one froze. And as Nelms waited for a good sign of one of the apes someone managed to wing one of them and they became briefly visible to everyone else. And being seen was a death sentence as countless rounds smashed into armor and tore the alien apart leaving it a bloody pulp sinking into the mud, aside from the blood that expanded into a deep red area in the swamp.

Nelms thought it best not to add his fire into that scene of butchery, it would have been an unnecessary wast of ammo. What he did do was keep an eye out in front of the platoon's position, watching the movement of the leaves and water for any disturbance other than the occasional bullet. Then he saw it, the thin spreading wake of something moving through the water, almost like a ripple but not. He aimed at the starting point of the wake then up above the surface of the water, letting his finger squeeze on the trigger as he let out a breath.

The heavy round went through the brute's armor like it wasn't there, ripping a savage hole through it's left chest. It stumbled from the force of the impact, but even bleeding profusely it righted itself and followed the bullets vapor trail back to his perch. It stared him down, bearing it's ugly yellow teeth. It was a target too good to pass up and as the brute raised it's spiker one more 14.5mm round tore through it's skull and exploded out of the base of it's neck.

What happened next just was not as fortuitous for him as that shot. Even though he was semi-exposed in the tree a brute decided not to shoot at him and threw a plasma grenade. The glowing blue pulsating orb stuck to the tree a few feet above the water and seeing this

Nelms hugged the trunk as tightly as he could. His world shook and his ears were assaulted by the loudest noise he had ever heard as an invisible hand crushed his chest for a second. Then it was over, either he was dead or the grenade had been just far enough away for him to-.

There was the sound of splitting wood below him and he slowly began to lean outward. Yep, he was alive... for the moment at least. The sound built in a catastrophic crescendo and the tree slowly fell until the rest of the trunk broke under its own weight. The tree, and Nelms, landed in the brackish water with a terrific splash and the sniper struggled his way through the branches and surfaced sputtering, lucky he hadn't been crushed. But as he sat there breathing hard and trying his best to unwedge his S2 something heavy landed in the water near him.

He let go of the rifle and pulled up his M7 watching the water around the tree. There it was, yet another wake. He aimed for where he imagined the chest would be and pulled the trigger. The first five or six rounds pinged off of armor and battered down the camouflage so he could see the fuzzy shape of the hulking monster just two meters away. But then his gun clicked and didn't fire a single round more. In a panicked rush he checked over the gun and found the problem, the magazine was smashed. Before he could replace it a massive shadow fell over him and he looked up into the eyes of a beast.

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The long overdue chapter three ends in a cliffhanger? Of course it does, things are heating up and the woods are a scary place.

/thank you for reading.

4. Guns, Explosions, and a curious plant

Guns, Explosions, and a curious plant

Put mildly Geoffrey Dees was furious. Most of his day he had been alone in a forest full of Covenant and the only reason his nerves had not been completely frayed was he had run into Mixer and the rest. And now it was getting harder to think and focus on the firefight he found himself in. It wasn't fatigue, he knew his limits and he was nowhere near them not to mention the adrenaline rushing through his veins was having very little effect on whatever was clouding his mind. With some effort, though, he could get his head back in the game and bring death to some brutes.

Which was exactly what needed to happen instead of worrying too much about something other than staying alive. He and Mixer's platoon were standing knee deep in water and muck, shooting at camouflaged brutes that were running between the tightly packed trees. A couple of the massive alines had already gone down, one in a hail of gunfire and another taken down by the platoons sniper who had found a good perch. Now the tree the marine had been in had been felled and the marine was sitting in the water staring up at one of their attackers. But it was visible at the moment and Dees fired two bursts into it's chest, dropping it to it's knees, but pulled back his finger from triggering a third as the sniper unsheathed a combat knife and drove it through

the brute's left eye.

That was three down but there was no telling how many were left, at least four judging by the flashes from their spikers. He aimed his battle rifle at the source of another stream of spikes and must have nicked it because a fuzzy shape came into sight. He quickly pulled the trigger again and three more bullets buried themselves into it's armor, bringing it's shape even more into focus as the camo generator reacted to each impact. But again he was denied a third burst as a full squad of the marines poured fire on the brute like a monsoon of bullets. It was torn to bloody shreds in seconds.

He glanced at the readout on his hud and noted he only had fifteen rounds left in his magazine, five more bursts. He leaned out from behind the thick group of trees he and two of the marines were behind and saw spikes heading right for his visor and duck back. Most of the glowing red rods passed in front of his face but a handful hit the trees with fairly audible thumps and two or three flew strait into the water in front of him, sending up a small amount of steam. He pulled a frag grenade from his harness. Hey, I may have a better bucket than everyone else out here but I am not going to stick it out there again without tenderizing the area first.

He tossed the smoking explosive underhand around the tree and readied his rifle. The grenade exploded with a little more muted bang than usual and the ODST swung around and took in the sight in the blink of an eye. The frag had landed closer than he had expected and had gone off under the water, water and mud was still raining back down. But Dees smiled at his luck as clumps of dark brown mud landed on their invisible enemies and left floating brown dots leaving three of the aliens somewhat visible. Dees picked out the closest of the three and buried six rounds in it's armor and flesh before a column of fire flew behind it and hit a tree near the center of the three. The rocket exploded and engulfed all three of the brutes in a fireball.
How the hell do they keep beating me to the kills?

He scanned the area in front of him again but saw no more spikes flying, no wakes in the water and no-. The air in front of him rippled as if he were looking at a broken mirror. Instinctively he jumped backward and landed in the water with his but touching the bottom as he fired a wild burst that went wide. But as the shimmering air moved closer to him one of the marines took a step closer to the edge of the trees and waited for the brute to pass. The PFC suddenly jammed his MA5C forward and up and held down the trigger as dozens of 7.62 armor piercing rounds tore, point blank, into the brute's head.

Once the big ugly had fallen the marine took one look at the mess he had made and offered Dees his hand. He took the hand and the marine helped him to his feet and the two of them ducked back behind the trees. Reloading he checked his motion tracker and was surprised two see four red dots mixed in with the blue ones, but he didn't hear any of the distinctive sounds any Covenant weapons made. The apes must have gone into that berserk fury of theirs and would do anything to kill with their hands, both a blessing and a curse really. They were stupid when they charged in like that but extremely dangerous if they get in close. And judging by the screams at least one had gotten close.

With a full magazine again he pointed his rifle at a ripple that

moved with one of the red dots closer to the marines and pulled the trigger. The three rounds pinged off of the thing's head and it stopped in it's tracks, fully deactivated it's camouflage and wheeled around to stare at Dees. At first it bared it's glistening fangs then roared as it charged straight at him, hands and feet digging up clumps of mud and throwing them into the air as it ran. He judged the distance to be about twenty meters and decided to stand his ground and fired repeatedly. His first burst hit it in the left shoulder and brew blood, one or two of the next three hit one of the side of it's helmet and tore it off. The third burst, which he fired from the hip because it had gotten so close, left a tight grouping around it's right eye and exploded out the back of it's head.

As it slid in the mud Dees swung his rifle up to take on the last few, but every time he aimed at one it was already being torn apart by the marines. The last one fell as it charged away from his position and he watched through his scope as an extremely pissed off looking marine put two eight gauge shells int it's chest. Then there were no more shots being fired, no more Covenant weapons and no more alien roars of anger and pain. But someone was still screaming as most of the marines peered through the trees for any sign of more hostiles.

"Spread out and make sure we're alone." Lieutenant Mixer sounded cool and calm and once again he found himself admiring the officer. "Who's hit?"

"Banigan has a broken arm!" The man with the shotgun called as he pushed through the trees and out of Dees' sight.

"And one of the bastards bit Childers' shoulder." Someone out of sight said

"How bad?"

"It went deep, he's bleeding pretty bad."

"Anyone else?" No one said a word for two whole seconds and the ODST smiled behind his visor again. _Yet again they amaze me. First they hold a city and now less than two dozen beat off an ambush by camoed brutes? Shock infantry indeed._ "Ok, Barnett, pull out that black bag of yours and take care of Childers, Banigan will have to wait. Squad leaders, and that includes you Dees, I need a word."

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"Ok, I'm not going to ask how we walked into that but I am curious why twelve brutes with active camouflage were out here. Ideas?" There was nothing unreasonable about the question but her tone said it all, she was pissed and killing the brutes hadn't hadn't take all the anger out of her system.

"I have a few." Donnelley said as he rubbed his chin in thought. "I know it may seem unlikely but someone may live out here and these guys were looking for stray human to 'cleanse'" He practically spat out the last word and Mixer felt the same bolt of anger course through her as he used the Covenant's word for genocide. "Or it could mean we were spotted and they laid a trap for us. In that case we have a lot more problems than clearing the area. And there is always the chance they were on one of those relic finding missions everyone

talks about. But if that is the case why the camo?"

"Who the hell would live out here? And I don't see any signs of mystical archeological... things either." Kostoff was turning red as he said this. "It was an ambush."

"But it was a sloppy one." The Gunnery Sergeant Dees cut in with his level voice. "If they had been ready for us, they would have surrounded us completely and opened up at the same time. Best as I can tell one spotted us and took a pop shot at your sniper. It honestly looked like we surprised them just as much as they surprised us." He's right, she thought, a broken arm and a laceration along with some cuts and bruises are not what we would have ended up with in a full ambush.

"Speaking of surprised, was I the only one zoned out when we entered the swamp?" They all looked around nervously and she had her answer. "Was everyone out of it?"

"I don't know ma'am. But the only way to find out would be to ask, and anyone with a brain would never say they did." Donnelley said then smiled. "But I will tell you that it is getting hard to think clearly."

"Same here." Dees' voice was still level and controlled. And even if he hadn't been wearing his helmet his face would still probably been the blank mask he always wore.

"Something very strange is going on here." Ryan muttered shaking his head and looked at her with worried eyes. "I wish we could call back and ask for at least some info."

"Ahhhh, but we can." The Gunny said wagging a finger. "Before we left the farm I had Childers and Lutz set up and hide a coms relay set to our frequencies. It won't do much if the Covies have someone watching the airwaves but It'll help."

"Donnelly, I love you" She said boosting the signal strength of her radio, switching to the command frequency, and keying the mike. "This is Lieutenant Eva Mixer, First Shock Infantry looking for Iocale Actual, come back" There was a second of silence and she was about to try again when a burst of static came through her earbud. "Say again, your signal is very weak., over"

"Lieutenant, Iocale Actual at your service, over." The voice was still fuzzy but she could hear him clearly enough.

"We're scouting the woodland west of Cumberland City." She started, taking out her tacpad and opening up the satellite image. "So far we have prevented the Covenant from setting up a forward base at reference one one seven point two by four three point one nine and run into two patrols the last of which was comprised of brutes with active camo at my current coordinates"

"I'll be sure to send that up the chain. Where are you now?"

"I'm standing in a reference one one nine point seven by four two point oh six."

"Gotcha." There was a pause then He came back. "Be advised

Lieutenant, that area is known to be the habitat for a flower that releases... I don't know how to put this."

"Releases what?"

"It releases a chemical that acts like an opiate when you breath it in." It sounded like he was reading the information and was a little skeptical about it himself. Mixer though just couldn't believe her ears.

"So you're telling me that my platoon is high right now?"

"If you're feeling a little tipsy or it's hard to focus then yes. On the bright side this chemical is larger than oxygen and masks have been proven to reduce it's effects."

"I see. Over and out." Mixer said then cut down the strength again and sighed. Why is nothing ever simple? She sighed and shook her head before turning back to her NCOs. She smiled at their curious looks and pulled up her balaclava. "Masks on boys, you are just not going to believe this."

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After the word had been spread to put on their masks, which made it harder to breath in this muggy environment, the Lieutenant had them beat feet on to the north west, still hoping to reach the river. That was really starting to get to Kray, each time they ran into an enemy they had to flee the area fast. Honestly he was tired and so, everyone was in need of another ten minute break at the least necessity dictated their actions so far today. So he kept his mouth shut and kept his eyes open as they trudged through the swamp, even though focusing still took some effort.

Even tough Mixer hadn't said what the plant looked like every so often he would smell something akin to a orchid and he would start to drift. It was kind of funny that something that smelled so sweet could spell out death, though that had more to do with the situation than the plant itself. And he still marveled at the strength of the drug, only a little bit went a long way in affecting the brain. I wonder what kind of plant it is. Is it a flower? Smells like one so it is a possibility. Maybe it's like a rosebush, but it grows in an area that floods often so maybe its a vine. Shit, I'm drifting again. Focus!

This time it hadn't been too bad, he had only moved a couple of meters so only a handful of seconds had passed. Still, as he was learning to fight through the fog in his mind it was getting denser and denser. Maybe they were nearing a large patch of the plant. That made sense since the platoon was walking almost directly into the gentle breeze that occasionally blew through the trees. He shook his head, he still wasn't focusing on the job. The Covenant was his concern right now even though no one had seen a sign of the alien's since they ran into the brutes. That didn't mean they were alone, not with a phantom armored group between them and the highway to the north.

He would have felt better if they were on real dry land. Not only was the water that filled his boots annoying, it meant that Lazlo couldn't work his magic looking for tracks. Though that in itself was

a little helpful since the door swung both ways and anyone who found the brutes couldn't tell which way the marines had gone. But the farther west they went the less UNSC air coverage they had which meant more _spirits _and_ seraphs _were liable to fly overhead.

The sound of a twig breaking snapped him out of his mental journey and he snarled because he had drifted again. The balaclavas helped but some of the powerful aroma still got through. Wait, twig? He looked down and was surprised to find himself on dry ground once again, oddly enough he was not as happy as he thought he would be. Looking back he could see the water's edge about three meters back, it ran straight into a rise in the earth that looked too steep and too straight to be natural.

Man made rise and leveled ground? So someone does live out here. I hope those dammed apes didn't- Focus! It was getting much harder to stay alert now, and his mind was cloudier than ever. Then he realized that instead of smelling a whiff or fleeting scent of flowers it was all he could smell, almost like he walked into a wall of orchids. He shook his head and pushed on taking the shallowest breaths he could. And as he worked on focusing he noticed something else, the trees were beginning to thin out, and in a few more meters they were gone.

As everyone stepped out of the treeline and onto bare dirt a collective gasp, or murmur depending on who was listening, ran through the group. The land in front of them was bare dark brown, almost black dirt that lead right up to plowed rows in the soil with just enough space between them for a man to walk. In these rows stood light wooden terraces that stood just a little above his head and each of these wooden frames was covered in vines sprouting dozens of yellow flowers. Peering down one of the empty spaces Kray could see a building in the distance.

"Ok, so let me get this straight." He said looking at Sergeant Ryan. "We are standing in man made fields of a drug plant, correct?"

"That about sums it up, Kray. We found a plantation."

"Listen up." Mixer said just loud enough for them to hear. "I know we have been moving fast all day but we can't stay in this field. We'll stop once we're away from these plants and take a rest. But move slowly and be careful, I doubt this place is legal."

So in groups of two or three they started moving down the rows of flowers and Kray did his absolute best to stay focused and quiet. It was slow going but they were still moving faster than in the woods despite their cautious pace, ah the glories of open ground. As for focusing that was hard, if the flowers created an actual haze his head would be the equivalent of crossing through the layer of clouds as you climbed a mountain. But he kept his mind on the building ahead and was watching for any movement on his motion tracker, that was until he heard some snickering from the row to his left. Curiosity, and maybe the flower took a hold of him and he popped his head through a gap between two of the terraces and saw Bradley, Nasri, and Childers picking the flowers and stuffing them in their packs.

"What the hell are you doing?" He whispered. Bradley, the tall woman that some had taken to calling Amazon, turned to him he could just imagine the massive grin she must have had under her mask.

"Are you kidding me man? This shit is great."

"And free." Childers said

"And free" Amazon repeated and grabbed a few more flowers. "Just imagine what it would be like to smoke this stuff. Its too good an opportunity to pass up."

"I'm not going to stop you, just don't. Get. Caught." He pulled his head back and shook his head in response to Lazlo's curious glance. Though he had to admit that she had a pretty good point, if the mere scent of the flower did this to a person it could turn out to be a great relaxant. No doubt some of the others were stuffing their pockets with the blossoms too and maybe Mixer wouldn't mind as long as they were focused during missions. He was tempted but duty took hold more than anything. This is not a time to be picking flowers, someone has to stay focused.

And stay focused he did, mostly, as they passed through the field. He estimated they had gone over two hundred meters before they walked out onto open ground again. Looking around he saw that Ryan had been right, this was a plantation with a field to his left and right each one hundred meters by two hundred. In front of them stood a group of buildings, each built cheaply out of steel and wood. The main one was long and low with a flat roof and several square windows, and as he walked around the building's edge he saw that a small dirt road ran between even more of the fields and ended in front of the building. There were two rickety looking buildings built closer to the fields that seemed to be large tool sheds and something that looked like a car port that formed an L with the main building.

Mixer Made a broad waving motion then held up three fingers and pointed to the main building, then she held up two fingers and pointed to each of the sheds. And as seven of the marines moved to the building closest to them she made a spinning motion with her hand for everyone to spread out and look around. Lazlo took off to the front of the main building with a purpose and Kray decided to stick with him and check out the car port. As it turns out that was exactly what it was, there were large tire tracks in the dirt and there was easily enough space to park several civilian model warthogs. There had even been space for trailers and save one that was missing it's rear axle everything was gone.

Lazlo whistled and waved him over and as he approached the other private pointed at the ground, or more specifically at an impression in the dirt. "Another track? You know I don't know shit about tracks."

"I know but look at the size of it. Whatever made this was big and heavy, much heavier than a human."

"Brutes?"

"More than likely and I've seen a few partial hoof prints so maybe jackals as well."

Just then Donnelley banged open the front door of the building and stepped out shaking his head. The marines who had entered the sheds emerged and gave the negative sign as well. Mixer put her hands on

her hips and looked around the compound for herself before heaving her chest in a massive sigh. "what did we find?" she asked in a voice seemed too loud to ears used to near total silence.

"Tools and the like in the north shed."

"The same in the south."

"We found stoves, racks, and packing equipment inside as well as some bunks, a fridge, a TV and a phone with a landline." Donnelley reported.

"There were trucks and trailers here but they are long since gone." Kray put in.

"So everyone just picked up and left?" Mixer asked.

"No ma'am" Donnely said "There were shell casing inside and a few plasma burns on the walls."

"There are boot prints too large to be human and some hoof prints allover the compound." Lazlo added.

"So the Covenant take prisoners now?" The Lieutenant shook her head. "Lets get back into the trees but we'll follow the road."

She turned and started marching across the hard packed dirt to the north as the marines pulled back together and cut through one more field of blossoms in order to reach the woodline. Kray lost track of how long they had been moving through the trees to the north of the plantation but little by little it became easier to focus and think without having his mind wander. After some time he was actually beginning to actually feel upbeat and even the prospect of climbing up another hill didn't bother him. At the top of the rise the trees grew thinner and Mixer stopped and looked around. Finally she pulled down her balaclava and beamed.

"Sit down and have a drink. Hell take a nap, one hour down and I mean it this time."

That had to have been the best three words he had heard all day, one hour down. Kray pulled down his mask and took a deep breath, holding the unblocked, unfiltered fresh air in his lungs. Letting out the breath he chose a tree, pressed his back against it and slid down blissfully. He was taking a long drink when Nelms and his spotter sat down across from him. He thought back to the day only a few weeks ago that he called the sniper's skill into question and couldn't help but smile.

"Well if it isn't the dynamic duo."

"Hello to you too." Nelms nodded to him. He only seemed to crack a smile around Bailey and that had been part of the reason Kray got to arguing with him. Honestly if you didn't get to know the sniper he seemed distant in that superior kind of way that most marines found down right insulting. That's why he had questioned Nelms' skill and been shown that he really was a good shot as well as decent at CQB. But he had realized that everyone, himself included, stuck much more closely to the people they had been with on Brakenor. He had Lazlo, Ryan, and Vik while these two only had been with each other. All of

them had just been coming out of that shell when they shipped out.
"Spare some water?"

"Didn't you fill up at the farm?"

"I did, but Bailey drank it all." The big, sheepish grin really threw Kray through a loop.

"Hey, I'm bigger thus I need more water." Bailey came to his own defense.

"And food." The sniper said "But that has nothing to do with size. You're just a glutton."

"No I'm not" He said pouting theatrically. "But in all seriousness I'm parched."

Kray shook his head. "I'm nearly out too, everyone is. It's hot and we've really been working up a sweat. But I bet you can find a solution to the little problem."

The sniper raised an eyebrow. "And that would be?"

"Come one you've already proven you can find water if you fall out of a tree."

Bailey laughed and a few of the closer marines chuckled but Nelms sat there silent for a moment. Kray began to think he had struck a nerve but noticed he had cocked his head to the side and was listening, he'd taken the hint. A smile slid across Nelms' face as he stood and walked over to the west side of the hill and let out a laugh of his own. Kray had been sure he'd heard the river and now the sniper had confirmed that there was water aplenty to be had. But the laughter stopped abruptly and Nelms came back, picked up his sniper rifle and went back to the west slope. Curious, both he and Bailey followed.

"What do you see?" He asked as Nelms held the rifle to his shoulder and peered through the scope. The sniper didn't answer for a long while but neither of them felt like pressing. Finally he lowered the rifle with a sigh, turned to Kray, handed him the rifle and pointed to the north west.

"Take a look. You too Bailey. Follow the river to the north and you'll see it."

He wasn't comfortable holding an S2, it was just longer than anything he was used to and it was off balance as he shouldered it. But once he got a good grip in the forward portion he put his eye to the scope and put the river in the center of his sights. He shifted his aim to the right and still saw nothing but trees and water so he kept going farther and farther right until he found the difference. In a narrow opening between two branches he could see a permacrete structure at the water's edge then he realized he was looking at the damn nearly a klick away. He clumsily found the zoom button and the imaged got closer and now he could see individual structures along the eastern shore. But what really caught his attention was the wraith tank parked between two of the structures and the group of brutes lounging around it, eating. He couldn't bare to look anymore as one of the beasts raised a human leg, from foot to knee, to it's

mouth.

"Lieutenant!"

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Thanks for reading.

Sooooooo ya, I added some drugs just to spice things up a little. Really I was taken with the humor of it but I honestly think it does add a little bit more to the characters' humanity. Also Sorry to any of those who are squeamish when it comes to humans being eaten, you really can't tell a story with brutes unless there is a little carnage.

**So I hope you enjoyed it and a new chapter will be out soon.

**

End
file.